

Belarus

Under its constitution, Belarus is a republic with a directly elected president and a bicameral parliament. President Aleksandr Lukashenko, first elected in 1994, has waged a systematic assault on critical elements of democracy: political parties, the independent media, and civil society. Through a series of flawed referenda, manipulated and fraudulent elections, and repressive laws and regulations, President Lukashenko has concentrated power in his hands, extended presidential tenure, and eliminated presidential term limits. The Parliament, chosen through a flawed election process, routinely approved presidential initiatives. The judiciary was not independent. The Government's human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas. Pro-democracy activists, including opposition politicians, independent trade union leaders, and newspaper editors, were detained, fined, and imprisoned for criticizing the Government. In June, the Government passed a law that made it easier to suspend or close political parties. At the time the law was passed, the Justice Ministry was in the process of closing approximately 80% of the opposition political party offices on a variety of pretexts. The Government increasingly used tax inspections and new registration requirements to complicate or deny the ability of NGOs, independent media, political parties, and minority and religious organizations to operate legally. It overtly interfered in the election of a new leadership of the NGO Union of Belarusian Poles. Amendments to the Belarusian criminal code introduced prison sentences of up to three years for "discrediting Belarus' international image" or for organizing or taking part in activities of a suspended or closed NGO or foundation. The Government tightened its control over independent media by imposing excessive fines and cutting off access to the state subscription service and printing presses. Authorities restricted the Internet by blocking access to some foreign websites, monitoring material posted on the Internet, and harassing persons for material posted on websites. Educational exchange programs and student travel were subjected to increased government interference. Trafficking in persons (TIP) remained an issue of concern, although the Government made serious efforts to combat this problem.

The U.S. strategy to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus consisted of applying political and economic restrictions; maintaining bilateral and multilateral diplomatic pressure; limiting high-level engagement with Belarusian officials to the assistant secretary level or below; monitoring, reporting, and speaking out on abuses; supporting democracy and human rights programs; and facilitating educational and professional exchanges. U.S. assistance focused on helping to develop and strengthen civil society groups, increasing access to objective information through the Internet, strengthening independent print and broadcast media, building legal defense capacity and advocacy for the rule of law, and supporting the development of a democratic political process leading up to the 2006 presidential election. The United States also supported capacity-building and legal assistance for independent trade unions. U.S.-funded exchange programs were tailored to familiarize a wide range of Belarusians, from students to professionals, with a democratic, market-based system. To help combat TIP, the United States focused assistance on efforts to prevent trafficking and to protect victims.

The United States cooperated closely with the OSCE, EU, and Belarus' neighbors to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus, including releasing joint U.S.-EU press statements on specific human rights abuses committed by the Government and organizing joint activities to show solidarity on democracy promotion. The United States co-sponsored

a successful resolution regarding Belarus at the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). It expressed concern about the Government's policies on human rights issues, including the disappearances and/or executions of two prominent opposition politicians, a businessman, and a journalist, restrictions on freedoms of expression and of the media, restrictions on the activities of NGOs, prohibitions of the rights of workers to organize, restrictions on the freedom of academic institutions, and prosecution of the political opposition. In December 2005, the U.S. Embassy along with EU Heads of Mission in Belarus, conducted a joint roundtable discussion with representatives from Belarusian human rights organizations on the eve of the UN International Human Rights Day to emphasize the shared concern of the EU and the United States over the state of human rights in Belarus and to express their support for human rights activists. Democracy and human rights issues were key themes in virtually all U.S. officials' speeches, press interviews, and public events concerning Belarus. The United States closely monitored the Government's persistent, calculated attacks on civil society and opposition political parties, issued a number of press statements on human rights and democracy violations, and posted these statements on the Embassy website.

In the run up to the 2006 presidential election, the United States repeatedly urged the Government to hold free and fair elections and to invite international observers to conduct election monitoring. The EU joined the United States in delivering these messages. Throughout the year, U.S. officials met with Belarusian election and other government officials to encourage adherence to democratic principles. In December 2005, a U.S. official met with government officials and representatives of political and civil society groups in Minsk to express U.S. concerns regarding the state of democracy in Belarus and to encourage the Government to allow for a free and fair electoral process leading up to the March presidential elections. U.S. funding supported training, technical assistance, grants, and cross-border exchanges for pro-democracy groups and political parties on internal governance, strategic planning, membership recruitment and retention, message formulation, and outreach. Partly as a result of this assistance, leading pro-democracy forces in Belarus developed and successfully implemented a process for democratically selecting a candidate for the presidential election. Nevertheless, in the absence of access to the media and given constant harassment by governmental authorities, pro-democratic forces face overwhelming odds in the election. To promote independent oversight of the electoral process, the United States provided assistance to a civic organization to train non-partisan election observers. Assistance to other non-partisan NGOs and independent media aimed to promote objective, fact-based reporting on election issues and awareness of voter rights.

U.S. programs helped independent media outlets find ways to remain in operation in a political and business environment hostile to free media and helped independent journalists access information resources. Due to the independent media's increased professionalism in providing objective and quality information, the level of public trust in the independent media remains high despite constant government pressure to close down or interrupt the publication of virtually all non-government newspapers. U.S. assistance to a local media partner enabled the production and broadcast of 35 television talk-show programs on social, economic, and civic issues, which were broadcast in seven towns with a combined population of 1.4 million people.

Belarusian NGOs remained highly dependent on outside assistance for survival, a situation complicated by legal restrictions on foreign assistance. During 2005, 18 local communities and 30 NGOs took part in U.S.-funded projects aimed at strengthening civil society. Despite the Government's 2004 closure of a successful U.S.-funded program, the Government nonetheless permitted 11 grants to NGOs to go forward. These grants focused on providing information or training to target social problems, from unemployment to health related issues. To foster greater citizen involvement in community initiatives, 55 training workshops on topics ranging from youth leadership to social entrepreneurship were conducted for more than 300 NGOs and community activists. Eighty-two NGO leaders and representatives of local government and local businesses took part in seven study tours to other Eastern European countries to learn better practices on key issues including health, entrepreneurship, and empowerment of women and youth. Through the U.S. Democracy Commission Small Grants Program, funds were provided to promote the pro-democracy initiatives of non-political civic groups and media organizations, including youth and women's groups, human rights organizations, NGO resource centers, and trade unions. A new U.S. program brought together alumni of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs to carry out democracy promotion projects, including work in support of gender equality and civic education.

The United States continued to provide legal and advocacy training and assistance for NGO lawyers and activists. As part of a legal advocacy program, the United States supported the development of a website for civil society activists with current legal regulations on NGO activity and assisted in conducting a roundtable for 70 NGO lawyers on rendering legal aid in an increasingly difficult working environment. In 2005, local NGOs, with U.S. support, analyzed the impact of mandatory short-term employment contracts on employee rights and conducted a public legal education campaign on worker rights by publishing pamphlets and holding 12 seminars attended by 365 people. Consequently, 18 attendees brought successful lawsuits against their employers for violation of labor rights through mandatory short-term contracts.

Although severely limited by the Government this year, training, exchange, and educational reform programs continued to be an important component of the U.S. democracy and human rights promotion strategy. Under the guise of an anti-trafficking law passed this year, the Government prevented high schools students from participating in the Future Leaders Exchange program (FLEX) for the first time since its initiation 12 years ago. As a result, no Belarusian students participated in the FLEX program this academic year, compared to 50 last year. Additional bureaucratic requirements imposed by this law seriously complicated other student exchange programs. The United States, however, continued to encourage Belarusian citizens to participate in U.S.-sponsored professional and academic training and exchange programs.

The Embassy regularly observed the trials of NGOs and media outlets, such as the Belarusian Helsinki Commission and Narodnaya Volya, which were targeted by the Government for closure on politically motivated pretexts. U.S. officials also attended trials for opposition figures, such as Pavel Severinets and Nikolai Statkevich, who were prosecuted for their political activities. The United States supported the OSCE's efforts to assist Belarus in meeting its OSCE commitments and issued statements calling on the Government to fulfill its OSCE pledges to observe human rights. The United States continued to press the Government to conduct an independent, transparent, and impartial

investigation into the disappearances of several opposition activists and a journalist. The United States issued a statement criticizing the authorities' reluctance to investigate these disappearances and their use of intimidation and force against participants in a peaceful demonstration commemorating the anniversary of the disappearances. To support women's rights and to help create a wider network for active women's groups, the United States launched a series of events focusing on women's issues in various aspects of civil society.

The United States urged government officials to respect religious freedom and monitored violations of international norms. U.S. officials met with representatives of a wide spectrum of religious groups and with the Government's Committee of Religious and Nationalities Affairs to advocate freedom of religion and the cessation of the harassment of religious minorities. The United States closely monitored incidents of anti-Semitism that occurred throughout Belarus and took actions in an effort to help prevent future acts. The Embassy regularly followed up on reports of desecrated bodies after the Government built a sports stadium on a Jewish cemetery in Grodno, and the United States issued a statement condemning the vandalism of religious icons and commemorative items at the Kurapaty memorial complex.

In response to workers' rights violations, the United States maintained close contact with local independent labor leaders and the International Labour Organization (ILO) and met with the Ministry of Labor to learn what actions the Government was taking to meet ILO's 12 recommendations to improve freedom of association and collective bargaining with regard to labor and trade union rights. The United States continued to support ILO efforts to promote worker rights and independent trade unions in Belarus.

The United States and other donors have achieved some degree of cooperation at the working level of the Government to counter TIP. U.S. officials worked closely with IOM's Minsk office and local organizations to monitor the Government's anti-trafficking efforts. Belarus increased its law enforcement efforts and instituted anti-trafficking legislation. As a result, U.S. assistance focused on areas where the Government lacked adequate funding, namely victim protection and trafficking prevention. In order to tackle the poverty and lack of job opportunities underlying trafficking in vulnerable communities, the United States worked with the IOM on expanding a successful pilot program based on the economic empowerment of women.